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Inclusion...Helping to Make Differences Similar

Natalie Howes
College of DuPage

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by Natalie Howes

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The Assignment: Students wrote either an informative, objective report or an argumentative position paper on a research question of their choice to their major or program of study by drawing from no less than 10 sources.

Compare today's society to a patchwork quilt: All of the patches represent different religions, races, accents, and even abilities. Even though the world has so many of these pieces randomly placed together, many times everyone works together in a productive society. Of course, not all of these differences blend together perfectly, but they can manage to work side by side in cooperation. This ability to work together is essential in order to maintain a more peaceful world. Why should this patchwork process stop with today's children? One more patch is needed in society's quilt, and this is inclusion. "Inclusion means teaching children with disabilities in a regular education classroom right beside children without disabilities" (Moore, 2000, p. 9). While this issue has brought much debate from concerned parents, inclusion is truly the best method to bond all children together in cooperation. In order for today's parents to truly understand and appreciate inclusion, they must first understand exactly what inclusion is and the history of its progress, how an inclusive education affects students, and lastly, know what is needed in a successful inclusive classroom.

While there are no laws specifically mandating inclusion, there has been important legislation that implies it. In 1975, public law (PL) 94-142 called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed. This law allowed many disabled students who were previously in separate, private institutions to attend public schools. At the time it was passed, it was the seemingly final end result of years of battles fought by parents and teachers concerned for the educational rights of disabled students (Lipsky & Garner, 1997). "PL 94-142 mandates that students be educated, to the maximum extent appropriate, with their typically developing peers in general education classrooms in their neighborhoods" (Mayberry & Lazarus, 2002, p. 5). This law brought many changes, but it was not enough. With this legislation came the idea of mainstreaming. Students would typically be in a regular education setting for part of the day and were pulled out for long periods of time to work individually with a special education teacher (Mayberry & Lazarus, 2002). This law was not sufficiently including students because they were missing valuable academic lessons and social skills when pulled out of class for so long.

In 1997, amendments were made to PL 94-142, and the name was changed to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Renaissance Group, 2003). "The emphasis of the law changed from a mandate to serve handicapped children to a law protecting the educational rights of individuals with disabilities" (Mayberry & Lazarus, 2002, p. 6). According to the National Association of State Boards of Education (1992), there were five guidelines in the original legislation that the schools must follow. First, an education for a special education child is to cost nothing for the parents, no matter how great the extent of the disability (NASBE, 1992). The next requirement is the due process right. "Due process rights must be ensured for all children with disabilities and their parents to ensure a free, fair, and unbiased assessment, placement, and programming for students with special needs" (NASBE, 1992, p. 6). NASBE also states that the legislation requires students to be educated in the least restrictive environment possible. "Least restrictive environment means educating children with disabilities in the same classrooms as children without disabilities to the greatest extent possible" (Moore, 2002, p. 10). Next, each child must receive individualized educational programming. This means an individualized education plan (IEP) must be developed for each special education student (NASBE, 1992). An IEP, specifically tailored to each student, includes specific information about how each child learns best, as well as goals set to be reached at certain times (Mayberry & Lazarus, 2002). According to the Renaissance Group, "An individualized education program is a written statement for a child with a

disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised" (2002). Lastly, NASBE (1992) states the fifth requirement to the legislation is parental involvement. Parents are required to be involved in all decisions regarding the education of their child. The only exception is if they choose themselves to give up this right (NASBE, 1992). Since the reformation of PL 94-142 to IDEA, many schools have drastically changed their policies. Students are starting to be educated together, regardless of their abilities. This fact has been the trigger to set off many parents who strongly object.

With all the legal aspects, something like inclusion may start to seem like a cut and dry issue. Unfortunately, this is not the case. While the legislation requires students to be educated in the least restrictive environment possible, it does not specify what this is exactly. Inclusion is not a legal requirement. It is not a law mandating a carbon copy education for every student. The word itself, inclusion, is never mentioned in any federal legislation (Sydoriak, 1996). Inclusion is more than an easily defined word; it is one of many educational philosophies. "Inclusion is a philosophy regarding the manner in which a free, appropriate, public education is to be provided to children with disabilities" (Sydoriak, 1996, p. 1). Inclusion is merely the schools themselves interpreting the best way to educate special needs students freely and appropriately in the least restrictive environment possible. "The law states that handicapped children should be removed from the regular education classroom only when the nature and severity of the handicap is such that education cannot be achieved satisfactorily" (Haas, 1993, p. 1). Instead of full inclusion, many schools still only use "pull-out" programs. Children with disabilities are being taken out of regular education classrooms to a separate special education program. "Advocates of full inclusion argue that the practice of segregating children with disabilities from children without disabilities fails to serve the individualized needs of each student with disabilities" (Haas, 1993, p. 1). The main goal of special education programs is to help the children to function well in society later in life. This will never happen if special education children are separated from their regular education peers: They will never learn the valuable social skills they need (Haas, 1993). When disabled children are educated with regular education students, they learn how to interact and socialize normally, which are skills valuable to all types of students.

Inclusion means much more than just placing a disabled child in a classroom. "Inclusion is being included in life and participating using one's abilities in day to day activities as a member of the community" (Tomko, 1996). Many parents who oppose inclusion assume the disabled children are just placed into the regular education classroom with no preparations or modifications made. The process is slow and requires much thought. Verna Eaton (1996), a special education teacher in the Sakatchewan Valley School Division, describes inclusion as more of an integration process. Integration is a philosophy and a complex and dynamic process. It requires ongoing, systematic and planned interaction with peers and adults in the regular system" (Eaton, 1996). This is not to say, however, that the regular education classroom is not affected. All involved must be willing to be open to change and diversity. "Inclusion in school requires a shift in the paradigm, instead of getting the child ready for the regular class, the regular class gets ready for the child" (Tomko, 1996). The children in the regular education classroom must be prepared to have patience and to consider everyone "equal members of the classroom" (Eaton, 1996). One common concern many parents have is that the included students will negatively affect their children. They fear that the classroom materials and lessons will be extremely altered to the special education child's needs, which will cause their children to become bored and restless. Actually, just the opposite occurs. Changes are made to affect only the disabled child. "Adaptations are made to the materials, the curriculum, and/or the expectations of the activities for the individual child, maintaining achievement of all individual and academic goals" (Tomko, 1996). Instead of attempting to meet one individual classroom's goals, the children cooperatively meet each of their individual needs together. These cooperation skills are surely an end result that makes inclusion a benefit worth pursuing.

The more important aspect to understanding inclusion is realizing how it affects students. Many parents who oppose inclusion get caught up in controversy and naturally get protective of their children. Any good parent wants their individual child to receive the best education possible. Quite certainly, more parents would support inclusion if they had a better understanding of how it positively affects both disabled and regular education students.

Inclusion allows special needs students to gain a sense of belonging and acceptance, while at the same time getting the specialized attention they need. "Inclusion allows a child to exercise a basic right, the right to be educated with their peers. Inclusive education will emphasize an unconditional acceptance of your child as a child, without regard to disabilities" (Moore, 2000, p. 12). With inclusion, special needs students will develop feelings of being part of a diverse community. Inclusion also allows for the creation of valuable friendships that otherwise would have never formed (Renaissance Group, 2002). Developing friendships and becoming part of a community are perhaps even more important for the disabled children than a formal education. The lessons learned through social interaction cannot be achieved without full inclusion. "The need to feel that one belongs is a basic human need, according to Abraham Maslow's theory of psychology" (Moore, 2000, p. 12). Children with special needs who have trouble learning may have a lower sense of self-worth. Inclusion gives them a sense of belonging that raises their self-worth. This higher self-worth can actually motivate the child to try harder and achieve more academically (Moore, 2000). Having high self-esteem will not only benefit the child in their schoolwork, but will also help them tremendously as they evolve in society. Like a circular process, these social benefits of inclusion grow to reveal more surprisingly helpful educational benefits (Starr, 2001). "The normal daily interactions that occur in the classroom allow special education students to form friendships that result in less disruptive behavior, increased independence and self-confidence, and an increased willingness to take academic risks" (Starr, 2001). Inclusion allows special education students to learn in a positive environment, as well as to develop valuable life social skills.

Perhaps an even greater part of inclusion is that it not only benefits disabled students, but also all students in the classroom. Regular education students have many opportunities to benefit from inclusion programs:

> Kids without disabilities benefit by learning to be patient with kids who need extra help in class. Research also shows that kids without disabilities who are in an inclusive classroom accept and value differences in classmates, have enhanced self-esteem, and develop a genuine capacity for friendship. (Mainstreaming in Classrooms, 2002)

If students with disabilities are segregated from regular education students, they get the wrong idea. "It sends the message that they are different and cannot function in everyday society" (Haas, 1993, p. 2). When given the opportunity to interact with peers who are different, regular education students also develop valuable social skills. " 'Typical' students, in addition to becoming more tolerant, caring and understanding, become more willing to give—and to ask for—help" (Starr, 2001). Children will also learn to appreciate the beauty of diversity and will become sensitive to the fact that everyone has limitations. They learn empathy skills, and inclusion allows them to experience the emotions, struggles, and triumphs of another person (Renaissance Group, 2002). Children with disabilities can teach children without disabilities many life lessons. When exposed to people who are different, they develop tolerance, patience, and understanding. In the ideal inclusive setting, everyone's individual differences are valued and respected. These skills and this type of learning environment can undoubtedly be of learning value to any child, at any level of learning.

Undoubtedly, the best way to understand how inclusion benefits all types of students is from a real-life example. The video recording of an ABC News documentary, Sean's Story: A Lesson in Life, directed by Roger Goodman, follows two boys with Down syndrome. One child, Sean Begg, is an eight-year-old who had previously been in a special education school called Ridge. His mother fought the school system to have him included in a regular education classroom for his first grade year. The other boy, Bobby Shriver, remained in the special education school due to his mother's wishes. The video documents the experience and shows the outcome of each boy's situation. The special education school, Ridge had previously told Sean's mother that he would never leave Ridge. At his new inclusive school, Sean's teacher, Kathy Epple, states that inclusion is what is best. "This is what is right for Sean. This is what is right for any student, to be included" (Goodman, 1994). With a positive environment, Sean slowly progressed and learned to interact appropriately with other students. Meanwhile, Bobby Shriver

stayed at Ridge School, not learning academic skills, but vocational skills. The students learned how to stock shelves and count change from a cash register. This environment is intended to help the special education students succeed later in life, but it realistically sets a bar for them that they cannot move past. In this instance, inclusion is the better option. Sean had a much harder time than his peers, but he is told by his teachers that he can achieve whatever he dreams. Special education children need this motivation to successfully complete and survive their academic careers. This can most importantly be understood by how the other students reacted to Sean. One seven-year-old girl describes how she viewed Sean: "Sean's not someone to laugh at. He's just a regular boy" (Goodman, 1994). This little girl's response sums up inclusion benefits for both disabled and regular education students.

Aside from the most important issue of why inclusion is important, parents must also understand how inclusion can be implemented. It is very important to understand exactly what is needed in an inclusive classroom. In order for inclusion to be successful, support must come from many areas. More importantly, these areas must work as a team. The roles of administrators, teachers, and parents must intertwine with each other for the best possible results of inclusion.

Principals and other administrators play an important role in the success or failure of inclusion programs. Programs can only succeed when the principal is an active supporter. These programs cannot be carried out successfully if the principal is opposed to inclusion (Stanviloff). "The role of the principal should be to ensure that a clear school vision is in place, establishing policies and forums for decision-making, advocating resources and defining staff roles, and overseeing staff development" (Stanviloff, p. 7). It is up to the principal to implement the philosophy of inclusion to the entire school community. "In addition, they can act as supporters for teachers by providing time, resources, and recognition" (Stanviloff, p. 7). The principal is like the backbone of an inclusion program and must act as a leader for the team.

Next on the support ladder comes the teachers. In a school that has full inclusion, teachers need to have learned new methods and techniques. Incoming teachers must develop better team-working skills as well as skills to address special education student's needs. "The role of the classroom teacher is changing to reflect more collaboration in inclusive settings" (Mayberry & Lazarus, 2002, p. 36). Aside from merely learning new methods, teachers must keep themselves updated with new ideas and strategies developed for inclusion programs. "Training should include joint planning, collaboration, co-teaching, curricular adaptation, new instructional strategies, classroom management, and assessment. Such training must not be 'one shot' but rather ongoing and on-call" (Lipsky & Garner, 1997, pl 136). A lot of time, energy, and planning go into the process of inclusion. Teachers must adapt their classrooms accordingly. "Sometimes, extra special equipment must be added to the classroom for those who need it" (Mainstreaming in Classrooms, 2002). It is important that the teacher educates the regular education students about the incoming special needs students so that they can understand and interact with them more effectively (Mayberry & Lazaras, 2002). In order for an inclusive classroom to work successfully, cooperation is the key from all levels of the educational team. This cooperation includes communication and understanding between students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Additional support must also come from a special education teacher. "Inclusion means bringing the special education teacher as a resource and teammate into the regular classroom to help not only the child with disabilities, but to help the rest of the children as well" (Haas, 1993, p. 2). This can make the class feel connected, as if they are working as a team. The teacher and special education teacher practice co-teaching. They deliver information together and share the responsibility of evaluating student progress. For example, "One teacher might teach a large group while the other teacher circulates around the room, paying particular attention to the needs of students with disabilities" (Haas, 1993, p. 2). A special education teacher acts as a support facilitator. "A support facilitator is described as a person who is primarily responsible for providing direct support to a room teacher with the goal of meeting the needs of all students" (Stanviloff, p. 7). The special education teacher plays a vital role in cooperating with the regular education teacher and in maintaining the success of an inclusive classroom.

Fellow teachers also help with the inclusion process. They can support each other by developing teaching teams. "A teaching team would capitalize on the strengths and expertise of the team members to

provide greater potential for quality instruction for all students" (Stanviloff, p. 8). When teachers work together, they can brainstorm for ideas to help each other and students in need.

Parents are also extremely important in the inclusion process. In her report, which includes helping teachers understand new methods in inclusive education programs, Linda Stanviloff describes exactly how parental input can be helpful:

> They can be advocates of their child's inclusive education, or members of educational teams, providing support. Parents can contribute very accurate information on their child's likes and dislikes, and have accurate medical information. Teachers no longer see their role to tell parents what to do, but now actively seek information from parents. (Stanviloff, p. 8)

Parents know their child's background better than anyone else and the unique insight they often have is indispensable to the success of the teacher's implementing inclusive programs. Parental input can help to provide the most appropriate special education program to suit the needs of their child.

Lastly, support from students is necessary in an inclusive classroom. Non-disabled students can provide much needed support to carry out inclusive plans. "Students can offer the disabled students acceptance, partnership, friendship, and personal support" (Stanviloff, p. 9). Students are able to provide many new, innovative, and modern ideas toward an even stronger inclusive classroom.

From the beginning, inclusion has been a wonderful idea. It has only progressed steadily upwards and continues to do so. With the development of teacher education programs to include inclusive education ideas and increased understanding among youths, inclusion practices are only becoming increasingly successful. In order for parents of today to fully understand and appreciate inclusion, they must know exactly what inclusion is and its history to understand how inclusion affects all students positively, and knowing what is needed in order for inclusion to be successful. Inclusion, when implemented appropriately, provides numerous benefits. It creates a sense of belonging and understanding in society that continues to develop and recognize differences.

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